

“PRE-SEMIOTICS” AS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY DISCIPLINE

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Imagine a country devastated by several revolutions and wars, a young country where people have almost nothing to eat, where all former social infrastructures have been destroyed and where the future seems very uncertain. Famished and cold, the intellectuals of this country spend their time dreaming of a “holistic science”, a Science of the future, which would allow for the disciplinary boundaries to be forgotten forever – much in the same way that the boundaries between countries, it seemed, would have to disappear imminently, following the great world revolution which was meant to take place in the very near future.

What I describe here is the situation in the Soviet Union of the early 1920s.

No, the word *semiotics* had not yet been widely spread at the moment of this search for a “holistic science of sciences”: historically, the word *semiotics*, derived from the Greek form *σημειωτική* referring to ‘sign’, was used from the beginning of the second half of the 17th century to denote the branch of medical science relating to the interpretation of signs. Later on, this term lost its medical connotations, maintaining rather the aspect of its meaning that refers to signs and their interpretation. In modern discourses, the word *semiotics* may be polysemic, referring for instance not only to a discipline concerned with sign processes (the president of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, professor Paul Cobley, is in a better position to talk about this), but also to a synthesis or a dialogue of various branches of knowledge. This interpretation of the term *semiotics* appeared as early as the second half of the twentieth century. Even if the word was not employed in the research being carried out in the Soviet Union soon after the socialist revolution of 1917, at that time there were several attempts to create a “holistic” science; some of them were implemented by linguists. In particular, many of the semantic laws formulated by the Soviet linguists could either be reformulated in order to be applied to other disciplines (literary studies, anthropology, archeology, biology) or “proven” by the facts or discoveries drawn from them. A “proof” that these linguistic theories were correct supposed the possibility of transferring the corresponding models and schemes from one field of knowledge to another: at that epoch the refusal to make a clear methodological separation between disciplines which were primarily concerned with “matter” and those that were more “spiritual” was an important tendency for scholars, both in the Soviet Union and in other countries.

What follows are two examples of such semantic laws that pretended to have an interdisciplinary character and that, because of this, were not limited to linguistics.

Soviet linguists looked to archaeology for testimonies of the law of “functional transfer”. According to this law, which is still mentioned in some books on general semiotics, the name of one thing is transferred to another object on the condition that the latter object “performs the same duties” in society at a new stage of its development. For instance, according to our linguists, the name initially assigned to the dog was transferred to the horse after dogs were replaced by horses as basic transport facilities at a particular moment in history. In the 1930s-1940s, Soviet archeologists repeatedly wrote about findings that seemed to corroborate these linguistic theories and this law in particular – such as, for instance, when they excavated the remains of horses that had been buried wearing dog masks.

Another semantic law was that of hybridization. According to this law, when two languages come into contact, the words of these two languages that have the same meaning “stick together”, so that the new word-hybrids have the same semantics as that of those they are made from. This law, and the notion of hybridization in linguistics in general, had

parallels first of all in the biological discourse of the era – the same time period in which Soviet biologist Lev Berg partly “turned upside-down” Darwin’s scheme of the evolution of species in 1922. According to Berg, species converge rather than diverge. Similar models were also created around the same time in other disciplines – in literary studies, for example.

These linguistic theories could hardly have been proven “scientifically” in the positivist sense of the word. Still, one of the indirect proofs of all such theories lay in the capacity of the corresponding models of evolution to be transferred from one discipline to another; this tendency was not constrained to the humanities or the social sciences. For instance, in order to illustrate a number of theses in his theory of biological evolution, Berg referred to linguistic facts – namely the convergence of languages. Berg also worked on the theory of convergence in ethnography, finding numerous folklore plots transferred from one people to another. Today such linguistic and ethnolinguistic remarks in the works of a biologist might seem misplaced, but in the 1920s-1930s, interdisciplinary dilettantism of this kind did not shock many scholars. The possibility of transferring models from one discipline to another had particular methodological foundations within the framework of what was to become semiotics, a discipline which still had no any widely spread name at that moment in history.

The refusal to make a clear methodological distinction between the study of matter and that of the spirit, therefore, was of great consequence for Soviet specialists in various fields of knowledge during the period in question. One might conceive of this as being analogous to a researcher who makes no distinction between the symmetry discovered in living organisms, in stones and in works of literature, because his interest is in symmetry as a universal phenomenon. The same approach was characteristic of many scholars at this given moment. As a whole, the 1920s-1930s could be considered an epoch of “holistic”, “global” disciplines even beyond the USSR. Another such example is the work of Eurasianists who had emigrated from Russia and whose method was that of “tying” together facts from various disciplines; there is also the work of scholars who had probably never heard about Soviet linguistics. Therefore the search for universal laws of evolution, along with the search for possibilities to transfer models and metaphors from one field of knowledge to another were important components of this particular scientific paradigm of the 1920s-1930s. In this sense, one can speak about an epoch of “pre-history” of semiotics. Often, the origins of this “pre-semiotics” were of a linguistic nature.

From pre-semiotics as an interdisciplinary discipline to semiotics as such: in 2019, the International Association for Semiotic Studies celebrates its fiftieth birthday, and its president professor Paul Cobley will speak to us about the interdisciplinary character of semiotic research today.